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FM AMEMBASSY NASSAU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6175
INFO RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN 4784
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO 2922
RUEHWN/AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN 5697
RUEHKG/AMEMBASSY KINGSTON 8616
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE 3629
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0197
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA 0636
RUCOWCV/CCGDSEVEN MIAMI FL//D/DRE/DR//
RUCOWCV/COGARD AIRSTA CLEARWATER FL
RHMFISS/COMDT COGARD WASHINGTON DC//CG-ACO-I//
RUCOWCZ/COMLANTAREA COGARD PORTSMOUTH VA//A/AOOI//
RUEABND/DEA DISTRICT OFFICE FT LAUDERDALE FL
RUEABND/DEA DIVISION OFFICE MIAMI FL
RHEHOND/DIRONDCP WASHINGTON DC//PASS TO USCG//
RHMFISS/DIRJIATF SOUTH
RUEABND/DEA HQS WASHDC
RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC
RHMFIUU/HQ USNORTHCOM
RHMFISS/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUWDQAC/US INTERDICTION COORD WASHINGTON DC
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SUBJECT: SEIZURES UP, MIGRANT SMUGGLING DISCUSSED AT U.S.-BAHAMAS
JOINT COUNTER NARCOTICS TASK FORCE MEETING

REF: (A) 08 NASSAU 429
(B) 08 NASSAU 191
(C) 07 NASSAU 1244

¶1. (SBU) This is a cable with action issue items. Southern Command/Northern Command/Coast Guard please see paragraph 15 on piracy.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Charge d'Affaires (CDA) and Minister for National Security Tommy Turnquest co-chaired the semi-annual Joint Counter Narcotics/Illegal Migration Task Force (JTF) meeting between the United States and The Bahamas on February 27, 2009. The Turks and Caicos did not participate in this JTF meeting due to the ongoing Commission of inquiry into the Governemnt of the Turks and Caicos.

¶3. (SBU) The parties discussed narcotics smuggling trends, including increased smuggling through the Freeport Container Port and the recent jump in cocaine seizures. The parties also discussed the possibility of greater cooperation in anti-migrant smuggling efforts; the GCOB's decision to enforce a ban on Haitian wooden-hulled sloops; and plans for the development of Great Inagua. END SUMMARY.

¶4. (SBU) In his opening remarks, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Brent Symonette noted the close relationship between narcotics smuggling and migrant smuggling and reiterated the GCOB's commitment to cooperating with the United States in the fight against both. Symonette stated the GCOB would continue to place a high priority on providing adequate resources to the Royal Bahamian Police Force (RBPF) and Royal Bahamian Defense Force (RBDF), including the development of Great Inagua as a platform for law enforcement operations.

15. (SBU) In his remarks, CDA Zuniga-Brown praised the GCOB for its commitment to combating narcotics smuggling and noted that cooperation through Operation Bahamas, Turks, and Caicos (OPBAT) had led to significant successes against narcotics smuggling in the past and he suggested further cooperation between the U.S. and the GCOB in anti-migrant smuggling efforts. He noted the importance of the GCOB's decision to enforce existing law requiring vessels entering Bahamian waters from Haiti to stop in Great Inagua and disgorge their cargo before returning to Haiti, and then challenged the GCOB to present a plan for the long-term development of Great Inagua as a platform for law enforcement operations in the Southeastern Bahamas.

16. (SBU) The Joint Task Force's third leg, the Turks and Caicos Islands, cancelled its participation in the JTF meeting at the last minute due to ongoing Commission of inquiry into the Governemnt of the Turks and Caicos. Over the next few weeks, post will reach out to its Turks and Caicos law enforcement partners to discuss the counter narcotics and anti-migrant smuggling issues raised at the meeting.

COCAINE SEIZURES UP

17. (SBU) Briefing the parties on recent trends in narcotics smuggling, DEA Miami Field Division Special Agent in Charge Mark Trouville stated that DEA estimates 5-10 percent of the cocaine entering the United States transits The Bahamas and noted an increase in seizures at the Freeport Container Port. Additionally, he noted, currency seizures in The Bahamas have accounted for nearly 14 million dollars in the last two years. This indicates that a substantial amount of cocaine is being smuggled through The Bahamas. He also noted a shift from the traditional Bahamian or Jamaican smuggler that once was utilized exclusively by South American drug trafficking organizations in this region to Haitian smuggling organizations. (NOTE: OPBAT seized 2,040 kg of cocaine during the first six months of FY 2009. That represents a 57 percent increase over the total cocaine seizures for all of FY 2008).

18. (SBU) Commenting that narcotics smugglers are increasingly making use of containerized cargo to thwart Bahamian law enforcement's detection efforts, Trouville stated that 905 kg of cocaine had been seized at the Freeport Container Port during the first six months of FY 2009, while only 1,251 kg was detected there during the preceding 24 months. Though, recently, the majority of cocaine seized has been found at the Freeport Container Port, small boat smuggling is still a significant threat as evidenced by the February 12 seizure of 808 kg of cocaine from two Haitian wooden-hulled freighters at Great Inagua. RBPF Assistant Commissioner of Police Raymond Gibson agreed with the assessment of increased cocaine smuggling through The Bahamas and noted that the RBPF also saw increases in cocaine seizures and arrests during 2008.

MIGRANT SMUGGLING

19. (SBU) Observing that The Bahamas had become a major destination and transshipment point for illegal migrants, GCOB Director of Immigration Jack Thompson stated that Bahamian law enforcement had arrested 7,058 illegal aliens in 2008. Of this number, roughly 6,000 were Haitians, while the remainder included Cubans, Chinese, Eastern Europeans, and citizens of various South and Central American countries. Thompson reiterated the GCOB policy of repatriating illegal aliens as quickly as possible and noted that detention and repatriation of these aliens cost the GCOB over 1 million dollars in 2008 and the government has budgeted 2 million dollars for 2009.

110. (SBU) U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) District 7 commander RADM Steve Branham agreed that illegal migration from Haiti was on the rise and noted that USCG had picked up some 3,100 migrants in Bahamian waters or en route to the U.S. during December 2008 and January 2009. Branham emphasized his concern with the potential for a mass migration from Haiti and said USCG had emphasized operations in the northern Windward Passage with one or two cutters patrolling there at all times. Branham stated that info sharing is critical to

success against migrant smuggling the U.S. government and GCOB could enhance cooperation and intelligence sharing regarding illegal migration issues. The Minister of National Security stated that he would support a working group on this issue and the GCOB would take the suggestion under advisement. RADM Branham suggested that the Bahamian Immigrations and the USCG public affairs offices work together to get the message out to the Haitian community regarding the dangers of illegal migration by sea. Thompson agreed that this was a good idea.

GCOB ENFORCES BAN ON HAITIAN SLOOPS

¶11. (SBU) As previously reported (REFs B and C), post has on several occasions approached the GCOB regarding the narcotics and migrant smuggling threat posed by wooden-hulled Haitian sailing sloops traveling through Bahamian waters. Though current Bahamian law states that, upon entering Bahamian waters, all commercial vessels departing from Haitian ports must off load cargo for inspection at Great Inagua, Bahamian authorities had not been enforcing this requirement prior to September 2008. In his remarks, Deputy Prime Minister Symonette said his government recognized the threat posed by these loosely regulated and frequently unsafe vessels and would enforce Bahamian law appropriately. He also said the GCOB was prepared to bring to a vote in Parliament legislation that would codify into Bahamian law the Code of Safety under the Caribbean Cargo Ships and the Caribbean Small Vessels agreements. The Bahamas is a signatory to both of these Caribbean-wide agreements, but has never adopted implementing legislation to incorporate their provisions into Bahamian law. These agreements provide health and safety standards applicable to wooden-hulled commercial freighters, along with an enforcement mechanism that would effectively ban the Haitian wooden-hulled freighters from Bahamian waters. (COMMENT: USCG reporting and anecdotal evidence based on observations of the Nassau port support the GCOB's assertion that it is now enforcing the ban on Haitian wooden-hulled sloops in Bahamian waters. We were pleased to hear the GCOB's plans pass legislation to implement the Code of Safety, however, since this draft legislation was first described to post in September 2007 (REF C) we are not certain it will be brought to a vote in the immediate future. END COMMENT).

Great Inagua

¶12. (SBU) As previously reported (REF A), Great Inagua, the southeastern most island in The Bahamas, sits astride the primary maritime route between Hispaniola and the United States and is an untapped resource for law enforcement operations against narcotics and migrant smugglers. At the JTF meeting, Minister for National Security Turnquest reiterated the GCOB's desire to develop Great Inagua. Noting that 3 boats and 40 RBDF personnel are already based on Great Inagua, Turnquest said the GCOB was committed to deploying more resources there. Turnquest stated that upgrades to the harbor and runway facilities were critical to expand operations on Great Inagua. Turnquest also noted that RBDF is committed to fully staffing and equipping a base in GI for the RBDF. The GCOB has committed to purchase 10 new vessels and 2 new aircraft over the coming years. RBDF Commander Commodore Clifford Scavella said the RBDF had plans on paper for the development of Great Inagua and suggested discussing them with embassy personnel at a later date. The GCOB supported the formation of a working group to discuss plans for developing Great Inagua.

¶13. (SBU) Referring to the damage caused by hurricane Ike in September 2007, RADM Branham stated USCG's commitment to rebuilding the hangar facility on Great Inagua and relocating USCG helicopters from their temporary operating location in Providenciales, Turks and Caicos back to Great Inagua.

GCOB Attorney General Comments

¶14. (SBU) Assistant Attorney General Bernard Turner stressed the importance of a migrant smuggling working group and the continuation of asset sharing between the US and the GCOB. The AG noted fees to

represent Bahamians who have been extradited to the US can be a significant drain on the GoB budget.

Piracy a Concern - Request
USG Assistance

¶15. (SBU) The GCOB requested assistance and information on international efforts including USG to combat piracy on the high seas. LCDR Bain, Port Department, noted that the Bahamas has the third largest ship registry in the world and due to recent incidents of piracy in other regions the Port Department would like to have some training on reporting procedures to DOD citing that piracy has become a major concern for shipowners. He also requested USCG partnership to review and improve port security measures in Nassau and Freeport. RADM Branham stated that the USCG will put LCDR Bain in touch with appropriate personnel at US Southern Command. ACTION ISSUE: Embassy requests Southern Command/Northern Command/USCG assistance in providing briefer/briefing to GCOB officials on international efforts including USG, to combat and respond to piracy.

Positive Press Coverage

¶16. (SBU) The meeting received broad positive coverage in press, radio, and television. The Tribune, one of three daily newspapers, on February 28, carried an article dubbed "Talks on stepping up anti-drug fight." Citing information taken from the 2009 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 'that understaffed and underfunded Bahamian Drug Secretariat hampered momentum in the fight against drug trafficking, and destruction caused by Hurricane Ike in Great Inagua last September, the article went on to report that both governments stated redevelopment of the Defense Force Base in Great Inagua as a top priority. The article said the US government showed its continued commitment to assisting Bahamian officials with a \$499,800 check presented to the Bahamas Drug Enforcement Unit by the US Drug Enforcement Agency. It noted that both US Charge Timothy Zuniga-Brown and Bahamian Deputy Prime Minister Brent Symonette agreed that developing the base at Great Inagua is a paramount in 2009 after the destruction caused by Hurricane Ike forced the US to relocate helicopters based there to the Turks and Caicos.

¶17. (SBU) The Nassau Guardian of March 2, carried a front page article inclusive of color photographs of officials attending the JTF under the heading in bold print "Inagua Base Overhaul Planned."

The article quotes Bahamian National Security Minister Tommy Turnquest as saying that the effort to transform the Royal Bahamas Defense Force operation on Inagua from an outpost to a full-fledged base has been in the works since the Ingraham administration took office in 2007. Minister Turnquest said "we recognize the need to improve Inagua, but what we need now is some infrastructural development within the harbor, which he said is a multi-million dollar infrastructure project. Turnquest went on to explain that the Bahamas government has taken "a phased approach in terms of the development of the base at Inagua." Turnquest explained that the base was never equipped with vessels since its inception - he said that the Bahamas government always had about a dozen marines at the base but no assets to do patrols. When the government took over in May, 2007 they made a conscious decision to improve the base. He

said that the government of the Bahamas is looking forward to being able to support the Defense Force's air wing, which is currently under expansion.

COMMENT

¶18. (SBU) The February 27 meeting continued the trend of substantive JTF meetings dedicated to discussing the latest narcotics and migrant smuggling issues confronting the U.S., The Bahamas, and the Turks and Caicos Islands. Though, unfortunately, the Turks and Caicos was unable to participate in this meeting, the parties

present agreed to pursue initiatives that should increase our ability to interdict smugglers, including plans to expand coordination and information sharing on migrant smuggling issues; GCOB plans to enact a law to implement the Code of Safety regarding small commercial vessels; and the agreement to further develop plans to develop Great Inagua, beginning with the reconstruction of the hangar facilities and the return for USCG helicopters to the island. Post supports GCOB initiatives for informal working groups on these issues and will continue to meet with the GCOB and appropriate USG interlocutors to encourage the full implementation of these proposals. END COMMENT.

ZUNIGA-BROWN